A TOOLKIT FOR BUILDING BETTER BEGINNINGS AND BETTER FUTURES:
Summary

Better Beginnings, Better Futures

An effective, affordable community project for promoting positive child development

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ABOUT
BETTER BEGINNINGS,
BETTER FUTURES

Better Beginnings, Better Futures was designed to prevent young children in low-income, high-risk neighbourhoods from experiencing poor developmental outcomes, which then require expensive health, education and social services. Since 1991, the *Better Beginnings* initiative has been operating in three socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Ontario, Canada.

Better Beginnings projects were developed, implemented, and managed by a partnership of community residents, professional social and health service professionals, educators, and others. Community residents had as much of a role in decision-making as any of the other partners. Indeed, it was this "shared-power" feature of *Better Beginnings* that differentiated it from most other community-based prevention programs across North America.

Better Beginnings, Better Futures has also been one of the most ambitious research projects on the long-term impacts of early childhood development programming ever initiated in Canada. The findings provide solid evidence that a universal, comprehensive, community-based prevention strategy — based on an ecological model of child development — can successfully promote the long-term development of young children and their families from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The findings also reveal that this can be done at a modest cost, and can begin to return the investment within as little as seven years after program completion.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

ROOTS

The roots of *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* are firmly planted in earlier research reviews and primary prevention initiatives by the Ontario government.

The first was the 1977 landmark position paper, *The State of the Art: A Background Paper on Prevention*, by Dr. Naomi Rae-Grant. She defined primary prevention as focusing on interventions for children at risk for a disorder or disability, but who do not yet have any symptoms. This definition clearly set primary prevention apart from promotion and early intervention.

Another important antecedent was the 1983 Ontario Child Health Study, which revealed that one in six children in Ontario had an identifiable emotional or behavioural disorder. This study also indicated that children living in families that lived in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods were at greater risk for these problems.

In 1988, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services brought together 25 researchers and program professionals to form the Technical Advisory Group to the Ministry's Coordinated Primary Prevention Initiative. What emerged was *Better Beginnings, Better Futures*.

THE *BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES* INITIATIVE

From its inception, the *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* initiative was meant to be different from earlier prevention projects. Its defining features and key project requirements were as follows:

- It was **multi-year** (spanning at least four years of a child's life)

- It was **ecological**, addressing all important aspects of the child's environment (family, school and neighbourhood), and **comprehensive** (i.e., it included before, during and after school programs; nutrition and diet components; parent training; parent support; employment training; etc.)

- It was **multi-sectoral,** integrating community services (health, education, child welfare, children's mental health, and other social services) to address multiple risk factors

- It was **grassroots** — the community was involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the initiative

- It was to have **high-quality programs** — *Better Beginnings* projects were to provide resources with benchmark child/staff ratios, adequate salaries, and ongoing training and support

Choosing the *Better Beginnings* communities

In 1989 the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services released the foundational document, *Better Beginnings, Better Futures: An Integrated Model of Primary Prevention of Emotional and Behavioural Problems,* which pulled together all the major findings of the Technical Advisory Group. Based on this report, a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) for project sites was issued on March 1, 1990.

Interested groups completed an initial application; some 50 groups were then awarded a $5,000 seed grant to prepare formal proposals.

In January 1991, eight communities were awarded *Better Beginnings* grants. Three communities concentrated on children aged 4 to 8, and five communities concentrated on children aged 0 to 4.

About the toolkit

A Toolkit for Building Better Beginnings and Better Futures focuses on the three sites providing programs primarily for children aged 4 to 8 because the research evidence for the effectiveness of the programs was strongest in those sites. All three of these project sites were located in urban centres in Ontario.

The Toolkit describes the major components of the *Better Beginnings* initiative and the critical elements to consider when replicating this approach from scratch. It includes examples from the three project sites, lessons learned, challenges, and strategies to address those challenges. Each chapter culminates in a set of guiding principles for the topic in question, as well as an implementation/ evaluation checklist, suggested on-line resources and abstracts.

Readers of this Summary are invited to consult the complete Toolkit for more information on each topic covered in the present document.

Throughout this document, we refer to four phases of the *Better Beginnings* initiative:

- **Proposal development** phase (March to June 1990): includes the development of the original local coalitions and the submission of proposals

- **Planning** phase (January 1991 to September 1993): includes the further development of the original local coalitions into an organizational structure, program planning and development, hiring of staff, community resident recruitment, and generally readying the community for implementation of the programs

- *Demonstration* phase (1993-94 school year through to 1996-97 school year): the period covering the implementation and early maturing of the local program models

- **Sustainability** phase (1998 to present): a culmination of the sites' transition from local demonstration projects to permanent programs

DEVELOPING YOUR PROGRAM MODEL

BETTER BEGINNINGS PROGRAMS: A BRIEF HISTORY

In the *Better Beginnings* approach, all programs are universal, high quality, multi-year, and comprehensive. The primary objectives of the programs are to:

- Reduce the incidence of serious, long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children

- Promote the optimal social, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive development in children living in disadvantaged communities

- Strengthen the abilities of communities to respond effectively to the needs of children and their families

Because each site was unique, the specific programs and services developed to meet these objectives were different for each site. There were, however, four main groupings of programs resulting from the ecological model:

1. **Child and family-focused programs:** toy lending libraries, family visits, family or parent-child drop-ins

2. **School-based programs:** breakfast or snack programs, homework help, in-class supports, cultural programs

3. **Parent-focused programs:** teen moms programs, parents' groups, parent relief

4. **Community-focused programs:** community action groups, community events, welcome baskets, social/recreation programs, community kitchens
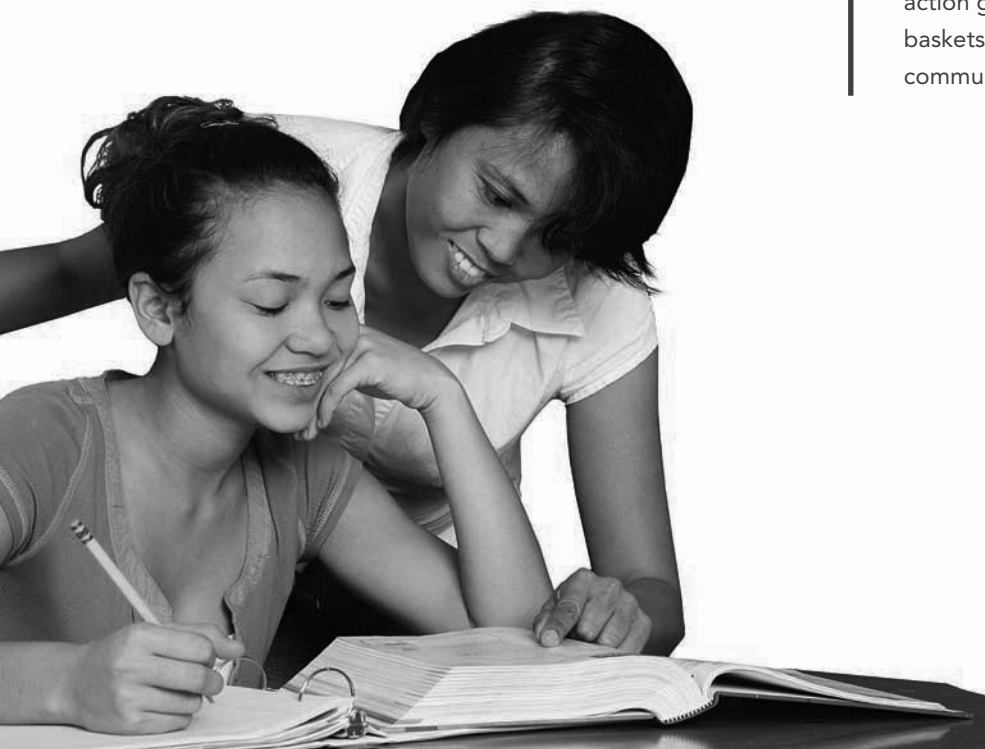
Developing your program model

How to begin

The first step for stakeholders is to develop their vision, values, goals, and objectives. Figuring out what you are hoping to achieve (long- and short-term) will help in deciding which program components to develop. Next, stakeholders need to become informed. You need to be aware of the literature and research on community-based prevention projects to ensure that the programs you develop are evidence-based and include elements that have been demonstrated to be important in achieving desired outcomes.

Effective community-based prevention programs for young children:

1. **Are comprehensive**, addressing several ecological levels (child, school, family, community). They must also be comprehensive in the different types of delivery used.

2. **Involve community members** in all phases of program development and implementation.

3. **Are provided in a natural setting.** Informal settings such as schools, community centres, participants' homes, and places of religious gathering are more effective settings than a health care professional's office.

4. **Are long and intensive.** Time is also needed to develop good relationships within the community setting: without trusting relationships, interventions are doomed to fail.

5. **Are flexible and responsive** to changes within the community.

6. **Have a clearly defined purpose or mission** to keep a clear focus over the duration of the project.

7. **Have a sufficient number of well-trained, competent, and committed staff.**

8. **Are thoroughly researched and evaluated** to ensure program effectiveness.

9. **Have sufficient funding and resources** for every phase of the program, from planning through implementation and assessment.

Who should be involved

In *Better Beginnings*, there were two main groups involved in developing the programs: community residents and professional service providers. Each site tried to recruit service providers who worked with the communities and who had expertise in different areas (e.g., educators, health professionals, community developers). Sites also worked diligently to ensure that residents were meaningfully and significantly involved in all aspects of programming. Finally, because *Better Beginnings* was a research demonstration project, researchers from several universities were also involved.

In developing your program model, it is important that a range of perspectives is heard — community residents, professional service providers, experts, and researchers. If there is a particular group within your community that you are hoping to serve, then you will want to recruit residents from that group to help in program model development. Reflecting on your goals and objectives will help you determine what service providers or professionals may be able to lend their expertise. If budget and resources permit, consult with other professionals or experts who may be able to help with specific program components or the model as a whole.

Developing a framework for your programs

From the outset, stakeholders at the *Better Beginnings* sites had a good idea of government expectations and available resources. You may or may not have the same starting point when developing your community-based prevention initiative. What your program model looks like will depend on the vision, goals, and objectives you have developed. Your own research and your consultation with community residents, service provider professionals, experts, and researchers will help you refine the various programming options available. You want to ensure the program components you develop are

evidence-based, but you also need to work within your own budget and resources.

Conducting a community needs and resources assessment may be an important step in developing your programming options. It will help you determine the community's strengths, challenges, and needs. Community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and perhaps individuals from a university may help in conducting the assessment. Because this is a big task, you may also need some technical assistance.

Creating your programs

Once you are familiar with the literature on community-based prevention programming, have your stakeholders on board, and have completed your needs assessment, you can start choosing or creating your programs.

First, get informed about what programming options are available that would suit your community and meet its identified needs. Look at programs in other communities similar to your own. Consult on-line resources, peers and colleagues. Seek the

assistance of researchers who can look through the research literature to identify solid evidence-based programs that might be adapted to your community.

It is important to select solid evidence-based programs. Yet it is equally important that programs are not simply dropped into place: a balance must be struck between program integrity (sticking to the original program model) and adapting the program model or approach to fit your community.

Developing a program logic model

A program logic model is a tool that helps depict a program — its major resources, what it intends to achieve, and the activities that produce those achievements. It can help both in program planning and in program evaluation. Although there are different formats, program logic models all contain the same core concepts: an overall goal or vision, the target population, resources (human, physical, financial, time), activities (actions and program components), desired outcomes, and indicators (how you will know if the desired outcomes have been achieved).

Supports and resources

In the *Better Beginnings* sites, stakeholders were provided with a seed grant that helped them develop their initial proposal. Sites selected to receive the *Better Beginnings* grant were then given up to two and a half years to further develop their program models and to implement their programs.

For your initiative, if seed money is not available, the stakeholders involved will have to determine who can do what to help move the process along. A detailed work plan can be useful for organizing the work and identifying potential resources (e.g., students or interns working with participating organizations, volunteers from the community). The working group should also identify someone to lead the process.

CHALLENGES

Better Beginnings, Better Futures was a complex and ambitious undertaking from the outset. Its aim was to have project staff, local service providers, and community residents work together to develop a comprehensive program model that would help better the lives of children and families living in their communities.

Understandably, a number of challenges were encountered in trying to achieve this goal. These included issues related to **limited time, space and resources**; **hiring the right staff**; **resident languages and multicultural issues; political issues; issues with other community agencies**; and **staying the course and maintaining the initial vision**.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

OVERVIEW OF THE *BETTER BEGINNINGS* RESEARCH MODEL

In 1990, a consortium of researchers, headed by Dr. Ray DeV. Peters of Queen's University, was awarded the grant to assume the evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* program model. This consortium was called the Research Coordination Unit (RCU) and undertook the responsibility for all subsequent research activities.

Managing the research process

The RCU was composed of a group of academics, from several Ontario universities, with a wide variety of expertise in the fields of psychology, economics, social work, education, sociology, family studies, nutrition and child care. These individuals developed the major research designs, selected ways to assess the impact of the program on children and families, and developed the major procedures for collecting and analyzing the information.

At the project level, each community had a site researcher, who coordinated all research activities; a site liaison, who was a member of the RCU and who served as a link between the RCU and the site researcher; and two or three site research assistants hired on an hourly, fee-for-service basis to conduct parent interviews, administer tests, and assist in other research activities.

As described earlier, one of the key distinguishing features of *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* was that community residents were involved as partners in every aspect of the initiative — including the research.

This type of participatory approach to program planning and evaluation has been shown to improve the evaluation research process, while empowering participants.

This type of participatory approach to program planning and evaluation has been shown to improve the evaluation research process, while empowering participants. Parents on the local research committee made a particularly valuable contribution to this process, pointing out when questions were unclear, serving as experts on how other parents were likely to react to the questions, and letting researchers know when their conclusions or interpretations were off-base or ill-informed.

Three different kinds of research were used to understand the project: outcome research, development/program model research, and an economic analysis.

Project development research

Since *Better Beginnings* was to serve as a model of how similar projects could be developed in other communities, it was important to know how the different programs implemented during the project were selected or developed, what services or activities constituted the different programs, who offered the services or activities, when they were provided, how the project was managed, and so on.

The project development research also served to help the project grow and develop in the best way possible. In the program evaluation literature, this kind of research is referred to as "process" or "formative" evaluation or research. It is used to form, develop or improve the program.

The major sources of information were field notes compiled by the site researchers and site liaisons, and individual and group interviews. Site reports were produced throughout the demonstration phase, on different topic areas, and then cross-site reports were written based on the individual site reports.

Outcome research

This research sought to determine to what extent the major goals of the project had been achieved. It looked at the project's impacts on children, parents, families and the community as a whole, by administering standardized scales and measures to children, parents, teachers, school administrators and others at regular intervals throughout the project.

Normally, the best way to determine whether or not a program has achieved its outcome goals is a true experimental design in which researchers randomly assign individuals or families to either an "intervention" or "experimental" group that participates in the program, or a "control" group that does not, and then compare the two groups. In this kind of initiative, however, where many of the programs are designed to affect the entire community, random assignment of families to an intervention or control group is impossible.

Consequently, two types of "quasi-experimental research design" were used.

- *Leading baseline design*: simply put, researchers assessed the families of a group of 8-year-olds (Grade 2) in the *Better Beginnings* communities **before** the *Better Beginnings* programming was implemented, and then, five years later, assessed the families of 8-year-olds in the community **after** *Better Beginnings* programs had been running from junior kindergarten through Grade 2.

- *Longitudinal comparison site design*: this involved comparing children and parents from the *Better Beginnings* sites with children and families from matched communities similar to the project sites but which did not receive *Better Beginnings* programming.

The three major sources of information for outcomes were an extensive **parent interview**, conducted with one of the parents of each child, every year from junior kindergarten until the child was in Grade 3; a **child assessment** of each child; and **teacher ratings** of each child.

To assess the project's impacts at the community level, statistics were also obtained from organizations such as school boards, the police, and child welfare agencies.

Economic analysis

The kinds of economic analyses we hear about most often are cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis. **Cost-benefit analysis** involves looking at the program costs and outcomes using the same units (usually dollars), whereby one can determine whether a program's costs outweigh its benefits. **Cost-effectiveness analysis** also involves looking at a program's outcomes in relation to its costs, but the outcomes are not in the same units as its costs (e.g., mental health benefits would be difficult to measure in dollars).

Critical to any economic analysis is detailed accounting of a program's costs. Consequently, one of the major data collection activities of each *Better Beginnings* site was the documentation of how costs were incurred, broken down by major program activity. All *Better Beginnings* sites also kept a record of services-in-kind, i.e. the amount of unpaid time donated by the projects' many volunteers.

Research results

The main messages from the research are these: the initiative was good for the children and families, it saved the government money, and it was tested in Canada.

The outcome results during the demonstration phase revealed that there were positive impacts for both the children and the parents from the *Better Beginnings* project sites:

- Children: positive impact on social-emotional functioning and physical health, decreased rates of special education

- Parents: healthy lifestyle gains, improved marital satisfaction, reduction in stressful life events

- Community: increased satisfaction with one's community, perceived improved neighbourhood quality

Cost savings analysis

- The overall cost per family for 19 government services was at least $7,560 less for *Better Beginnings* families than for families from the comparison sites.

- Considering the average of $2,991 spent per family for the four years of participation in *Better Beginnings* programs, the government saved approximately $4,569 per family by Grade 12 on other services, including education and social services.

The longitudinal research also revealed many positive findings in the children and families from the three *Better Beginnings* sites:

- Youth in Grade 9: better school and academic performance; teachers reported that youth were better prepared for school, required less special education, repeated fewer grades, demonstrated more adaptive functioning, had fewer emotional problems, and had lower rates of hyperactivity

- Youth in Grade 12: better school and academic performance; youth exercised more; fewer were involved in property crimes

- Parents of youth when in Grade 9: more satisfied with marital relationship, more positive family functioning, greater social support

- Parents of youth in Grade 12: less depressed, used alcohol less often, felt neighbourhoods were more cohesive

- Thus, for every dollar invested in *Better Beginnings*, there was a reduction of $2.50 in costs for other government services.

The cost savings is a conservative estimate, based on only direct government costs and excluding projected costs (e.g. preventing youth from a lifetime of crime).

RESEARCHING AND EVALUATING YOUR OWN PROJECT

We realize that not all community-based prevention initiatives will include such a large research component as the *Better Beginnings* initiative. Nonetheless, we believe the lessons learned can help others evaluate their own initiatives.

> *Project development research can help you to determine how well your programs are developing, what is working well and what is not.*

Why it's important

It is essential that stakeholders understand the importance of research and evaluation and how it can help your community-based prevention initiative. **Project development research**, sometimes referred to as formative or process research, can help you to determine how well your programs are developing, what is working well and what is not, and how well a particular program was implemented. (Were the target populations reached? Are people receiving the intended services? Are staff adequately qualified and trained?) It can help you understand why you saw the impacts or outcomes that you did — or why not. **Outcome evaluation** will help you determine if you reached your goals. It can also help you determine any unintended impacts or outcomes. This type of research and evaluation is often required by your funders; it can also help you raise additional funds if your outcomes are positive.

Sufficient resources

We realize that other community-based prevention projects may not have the same level of resources as the *Better Beginnings* initiative. Nevertheless, our recommendation is not to short-change your project's research/evaluation budget. The research and evaluation you conduct will provide important information, not only about whether you achieved your goals, but also what it was about the program that got you there.

Developing your research design

Your research and evaluation design will depend on funder requirements, your budget, and the questions that need to be answered. You may require the help of an evaluation consultant or community researcher to help you design your evaluation and select appropriate measures. Issues to consider include the evaluation design and components, the program logic model, assessing impacts and outcomes, assessing process, economic analysis and community resident participation.

> *The research and evaluation you conduct will provide important information, not only about whether you achieved your goals, but also what it was about the program that got you there.*

CHALLENGES

The **start-up phase** lasted much longer than originally estimated: it took the *Better Beginnings* sites roughly two and a half years before reaching a point where outcome data could begin to be collected. However, having researchers involved from the outset was important for collecting process evaluation data, used to document the formation of the project, to provide feedback to aid in the development process, and to provide information to funders on progress being made.

Other challenges encountered by researchers included **getting residents and other community stakeholders involved** in the research process, **developing trusting relationships** with community members (some had previous negative experiences with researchers), **playing multiple roles and dealing with conflicts** and other issues that arose, and **working with community residents as research assistants** (no training or education in research, interviewing, or data collection; unfamiliar with workplace practices).

COMMUNITY RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

BETTER BEGINNINGS COMMUNITY RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

The hallmark of *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* is the meaningful, significant participation of community residents in all aspects of project decision-making.

A brief history

At the *Better Beginnings* sites, during the proposal development stage, community residents were consulted through community meetings, surveys, and one-on-one discussions. However, there was little or no involvement of residents in the meetings and work that went into the development of the proposal. In fact, each of the sites experienced substantial barriers to community resident participation, including lack of time, barriers relating to class, culture and language, inconvenient meeting times, and distrust of service providers.

Once a community's proposal had been selected, however, and the sites moved into the planning and then demonstration phases, each of the three sites worked hard to include residents in program development, implementation, delivery, and governance. *Better Beginnings* staff, service providers, and researchers made diligent efforts to ensure that parents felt welcome, included, and important to the building of the local project. Structures were created to govern the project (i.e., main decision-making body, sub-committees or working groups) and residents were encouraged to get involved.

A shared-power approach

The amount of time and attention each site devoted to the community resident participation aspect of the project, and the success that they achieved with it, resulted in *Better Beginnings* achieving a reputation as a model of resident involvement. Many people, often accustomed to top-down initiatives, saw *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* as community-driven, rather than agency/expert-driven. In reality, it was a shared-power approach, between community residents, community partners, program staff, and government funders.

This shared-power approach included several key characteristics:

- Community residents were meaningfully and significantly involved in **defining the needs of the community and identifying programs and activities** to meet those needs.

- Community residents were actively involved in **all aspects of program development and delivery, as well as research** on the project. They were key decision-makers in determining the what, how, who, and where of the local projects.

- **Community-building and community development were the foundation** of much of the programming in *Better Beginnings* communities.

- Every effort was made to make programs **comfortable, accessible, and available** in the language(s) that residents spoke.

- **Community events and celebrations** were considered a crucial means of bringing individuals together and giving them a sense of community.

Roles, activities, benefits

Community residents took on many roles in each of the *Better Beginnings* projects in four key areas: project development and governance, programming, community outreach and advocacy, and research.

Benefits for residents included achieving personal growth and a sense of empowerment, opportunities for learning, increased social and concrete support, and positive impacts on lifestyle or quality of life. Benefits for the projects included critical contributions to program development and implementation, a positive impact on service providers, and an enhanced regard for the project by the wider community. Benefits for the communities included positive impacts on the sense of community ownership and responsibility, community improvements (playgrounds, safety, etc.), and increased social action.

BUILDING MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

How to begin

Stakeholders must be clear about why they wish to involve community residents. All stakeholders involved — staff, residents, and service providers — will need to understand the roles that residents will play in the initiative and the scope of their involvement.

Ensure that all stakeholders involved understand the shared-power approach — its meaning and its limitations. Begin with a group of residents or parents who are already involved in the community. If a community developer or facilitator is being hired, that person must relate well to the community, and have the necessary skills and energy to motivate and recruit residents to participate. If possible, include residents on your hiring committees or in interviewing processes.

Who should be involved?

In *Better Beginnings*, there was a need to recruit parents of children in the projects' target age range. Without those community residents, the sites could not have known if they were meeting the needs of those parents. However, other community residents were also recruited who were committed to the *Better Beginnings* approach.

Your prevention initiative may be intended for specific age groups, and therefore, you may need to ensure that those residents are included in your project. As well, if your neighbourhood has prominent minority or ethnic groups, then you will want to reach out to them. A good way to do this is to distribute any information about the initiative in multiple languages. Consult with other organizations and agencies who work in your community about where to find these residents. Knowledge of your community will be key in knowing where to go to recruit potential participants.

You will also need to consider if there are certain skills that residents should possess. Or, will it suffice to have willing participants, who can be trained to develop any necessary skills? If you have an abundance of volunteers, then selecting by skills may maximize everyone's potential. If not, consider providing training experiences for volunteers.

What roles should residents play?

In the *Better Beginnings* approach it was clear that residents were to be equal partners with service providers and staff. The projects had to have community residents deeply involved in program design, development, implementation and management.

What are you hoping to achieve by having residents involved in your initiative? Your ultimate goals should help dictate the types of roles that residents should assume. Be aware that not all residents will want to take on certain roles — particularly those in decision-making and governance. However, you can gently encourage residents and provide some coaching to help them move beyond their comfort levels to take on different types of roles.

Hiring community residents for staff positions

Hiring neighbourhood residents was a major strategy adopted at all sites to incorporate resident wisdom into project and program development. It was clear that resident employment had a substantial impact on the project. Yet there were also some unanticipated effects and challenges, such as loss of the most active volunteer leaders as they became staff, confusion as resident staff continued to hold committee positions that they had held as volunteers, a sense of losing their status as equal partners when resident staff found themselves supervised by professionals, and tensions with peers not in staff positions. It is important to be clear with residents when they apply for staff positions what they might face or have to give up if they become staff.

Whom do residents represent?

It is not always clear when residents become involved with community initiatives, as voting members of decision-making bodies, whom they represent. Service providers represent their agencies or organizations. But do resident volunteers on a committee represent just themselves or a larger constituency? It is therefore important to be clear about whom residents represent on decision-making bodies.

Supports and resources for recruiting and retaining volunteers

In order to create and maintain meaningful community resident participation, community initiatives will need to devote adequate supports and resources to this effort. It is a good idea to have a full-time community developer/facilitator or volunteer coordinator to take on the lead role in recruiting and retaining community residents. Staff time will be required for resident recruitment, support, training, and skill building.

Financial resources should also be dedicated to recognizing the volunteer efforts of residents (recognition dinners, gift certificates, honoraria); covering any expenses incurred by community residents (child care, transportation); reimbursing community residents who provide services such as cooking or custodial work; and translation services for project materials, if required.

CHALLENGES

Despite the many benefits from having residents meaningfully and fully involved, each site experienced its own barriers, obstacles and challenges. These included **residents' apprehension and discomfort** (anxiety or shyness among those used to staying at home; distrust or fear working with service providers); **conflicting commitments and difficulties juggling responsibilities** (residents living in poverty felt stressed and overwhelmed); **ethnic tensions, language barriers and cultural differences**; **failed expectations and disappointments** (too much expected too soon; residents feeling under-valued for their work); **high rates of turnover**; and a **lack of resources** (for training volunteers or translating project materials).

ENGAGING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES PARTNERSHIPS

A brief history

In each of the *Better Beginnings* sites, key stakeholders partnered with other organizations and agencies during the proposal development stage. This partnership initially took the form of like-minded individuals who may have known of one another through past relationships or partnerships. Many of these partnerships continued throughout the planning, demonstration, and sustainability phases. As the programs were being designed and/or implemented, new partnerships were also forged.

Why partner?

Positive impacts of these partnerships and collaborations included increased levels of programming, increased visibility in the communities, sharing of resources (which allowed for the expansion of programming), positive changes in attitude among some service providers, positive changes in ways of working among some service providers, and the creation of new structures.

Service providers were motivated to partner for reasons such as shared goals and values, similar mandates, commitment to enhancing service delivery and to developing a collaborative model, desire to provide more services to children and families in the community, and the positive reputation of *Better Beginnings*. Sometimes, however, it was necessary for the sites to try to forge relationships with service providers who were not, initially, interested in partnering.

HOW TO PARTNER

In the *Better Beginnings* initiative, a first set of partners came together during the proposal development phase. Those individuals then invited other service providers to join. They sought out agencies and organizations that had the skills, expertise, and connections necessary to help them realize the project's vision and goals.

Decide who to select as partners

Consider the vision, values, goals, and objectives of your initiative. Which service sectors will help you achieve those goals (e.g. education, health, community development, recreation)? What could service providers contribute to your initiative? Do they have similar mandates to yours? Do they know the community well? Do they have ties to the community? Overall, is there a good "fit" between potential partners?

Create a shared vision for collaboration

You will need to decide on two things in creating a shared vision for the partnership: the type and the approach. There are three types of partnerships:

- **Cooperation:** A set of organizations exchange information and discuss problems, activities or programs that are of common interest. Each acts autonomously in responding to the common interest either by creating its own independent initiative or by making a contribution under its own auspices to a larger initiative.

- **Collaboration:** Organizations work together to solve a problem or to create a program. They may set common goals, share staff and other resources, and participate on joint structures to plan and monitor common activities. However, each agency maintains control about how it will participate.

- **Integration:** The consolidation or merger over time of all or part of formally separate service units. Typically this involves the creation of new authority structures, the pooling of staff and other resources, and the establishment of common goals and working methods.

Approaches to partnerships include:

- **Voluntary:** A set of organizations are connected loosely and on a voluntary basis.

- **Mediated:** A set of organizations are linked through the efforts of one organization, which takes primary responsibility for guiding integration but may also direct services. Each organization participates on a voluntary basis.

- **Directed:** One organization has a mandate to direct the integration of a set of organizations, and has the authority to impose decisions on participating organizations.

In *Better Beginnings*, the type of partnership most closely resembled "collaboration," and the approach most closely resembled a "mediated integration."

In creating a shared vision, first develop some knowledge of the types and approaches of collaboration/ partnerships that are described in the literature. Use that knowledge to begin thinking about what type of partnership would be best in your community. Then, organize a "visioning" day to plan for the partnership.

Get organized

At each of the *Better Beginnings* sites, some organizational structure was established to help facilitate the development of the proposal. The organizational structure then continued to evolve throughout the planning, demonstration, and sustainability phases.

Develop an initial decision-making group or steering committee — this is the group that gets things started. In developing this group you will need to think about aspects such as how many people

should be involved, who should be represented, and how often the group will meet. Once this steering committee is developed, other structures may be developed to move the initiative along. Smaller working groups, ad-hoc committees, or task groups could be formed to help develop specific aspects of the initiative. Once the programs are planned and implemented, the organizational structure of your initiative may need to evolve or change.

Decide on the roles of partners

There are two general roles that service providers can play. First, service providers can participate in the administration and management of your project (i.e., voting members of committees/boards of directors). Second, service providers can be active in the development and delivery of the prevention programs (e.g., providing expertise, providing staff to help deliver programs, providing space/resources).

Based on your vision and goals, decide if service providers will be involved in one or both of these roles. Then, consider what structures, mechanisms, and/or agreements are required to make this partnership feasible and/or manageable. You may need to plan for differing levels of involvement, as some larger organizations may have many resources to commit to a partnership while other local grassroots organizations may have fewer.

Decide who will represent the partner agencies

In *Better Beginnings*, there was no initial consideration of the types of agency representatives desired (e.g., executive directors, managers, front-line personnel). In the early years (i.e., planning phase and early part of the demonstration phase), representatives tended to be from upper or middle management. In the later years of the demonstration phase, there was a shift towards including front-line staff.

When deciding which individuals from these organizations or agencies should be involved, consider the roles they will play, the level of decision-making authority required, the time involved, and the "fit" of specific individuals.

Strive to obtain agency support for their representatives

During the proposal development stage, there were some individuals who became involved with the *Better Beginnings* sites because of their personal commitment to the process, but who did not necessarily have support from their employers. During the planning, demonstration, and sustainability phases, there were differing levels of collaboration amongst the partners involved.

It is important to recognize that not all partners will be able to commit the same level of time and resources. Be clear about the minimum level of support and commitment that will be required, and explore with potential partners how much they are able, and willing, to contribute (e.g., staff resources, space, expertise, time). Specific mechanisms may need to be put in place in some cases (e.g., providing teacher release time).

Secure resources to develop partnerships

Devoting resources to developing a collaboration initiative is important. In-kind resources provided by partnering agencies and organizations are also important. These might include staff time, space, equipment, and materials.

CHALLENGES

At the *Better Beginnings* sites, challenges relating to engaging with community partners included **figuring out how to work together** (e.g., confusion and a lack of understanding about service providers' roles), **differing levels of support and commitment from collaborating agencies** (participation in *Better Beginnings* was often an "add-on" to the service provider's everyday responsibilities), **learning to trust each other,** and **creating a balance of power** (i.e., between service provider involvement, community resident participation, and staff involvement).

PROJECT ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

BETTER BEGINNINGS PROJECT ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

A brief history

Initially, each *Better Beginnings* site had a "host organization" that was legally and financially responsible for the project. During the proposal development stage, projects were managed by the group that was responsible for developing and submitting the proposal. This usually included residents and service providers from the host and/or other agencies or organizations.

After receiving funding, each site had to hire key staff, develop the overall program model and specific components, further enhance community resident participation, further develop partnerships with service providers, and develop the organizational structure. Generally, the groups tended to delegate tasks and responsibilities by creating sub-committees, working groups, or task forces to tackle certain aspects of project development.

During the latter part of the planning phase and early part of the demonstration phase, service provider involvement lessened somewhat as staff was hired. The original service provider decision-makers, therefore, were less "hands-on" during this time. As a result, roles and responsibilities needed to be clarified. As time went on, and programs were up and running smoothly, the organizational structure at each of the sites tended to be simplified. A main decision-making group was kept, as well as some sub-committees, but once programs were implemented, the need for many of the working groups or committees was reduced.

Each project site had its own unique organizational and management structure, and its own evolution throughout the years.

Values and principles guiding project development

To understand the organization and management of the *Better Beginnings* projects, it is important to understand the values and principles that guided project development, organization, and management at the sites. Stakeholders spent considerable time and energy identifying, discussing, and clarifying these values and principles.

Key values and principles of *Better Beginnings* projects:

1. Community participation and ownership
2. Inclusiveness
3. Hiring residents as staff
4. A democratic management style
5. New ways of thinking and acting

How to build a workable organizational structure

The organizational structure is the framework around which your group is organized. It can take many different forms. Regardless of what your structure looks like, it should provide you with governance for your initiative, rules by which your organization operates, and a distribution of work.

How to begin

In *Better Beginnings*, from the outset, the government provided a core set of principles which the project sites had to use in day-to-day operations. Even so, each site's administrative structure and management procedures developed differently.

In developing your organizational and administrative structures and procedures, it is important to be clear about the values, principles, goals and objectives that will guide not only the project's development, but also its governance. Select individuals who agree with your values and principles and can contribute meaningfully to your project. When selecting your host or sponsor organization, be sure there is a good fit with respect to the values and principles of your prevention initiative.

Decide who should be involved

Think about whether the organizations you are considering partnering with have similar mandates. Do they agree with your governing principles? Do they have similar ways of working with the community? Do they have experience with a shared-power approach where residents have an equal voice? With respect to recruiting community residents, are there programs designed for particular groups or populations? If you are trying to include minority groups, you will need to address cultural and language issues.

Considerations for whom to select as partners, both service providers and residents, are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4: Community Resident Participation and 5: Engaging Community Partners.

Decide what roles different stakeholders should play

In the early years, all three sites had similar roles for both residents and service providers, serving on decision-making bodies and sub-committees, and being involved in the hiring process, for example. However, in the later years of the demonstration phase, one of the three sites split from the host agency and became incorporated. From that point on, only residents were allowed on the main decision-making body. Service providers were still involved as partners in program delivery but not in project governance.

When it comes to project management, be clear about your goals and objectives with respect to having others involved. Note that, at first, it may be difficult to get enough community residents interested in taking on decision-making and governance roles. They will require encouragement, support, and training.

Develop a decision-making process

In all *Better Beginnings* sites, decisions were arrived at through consensus. There seemed to be a commitment at each of the sites to ensuring that those involved in the governing committees had a chance to discuss issues and feel good about the decisions that were reached. You will need to decide on the process that will be used to make decisions (e.g., consensus, majority vote).

If consensus is used, be clear about what that means (how it will be achieved, what steps will be taken when consensus cannot be achieved). It may be necessary to train committee members on how to make decisions by consensus. If voting is used, then other issues will need to be considered, such as what constitutes a majority or a quorum.

Develop clear policies for project governance and management

Very early on, your main decision-making group will need to develop clear project governance and management policies that can help in the start-up and implementation phase, as well as for ongoing project management. Aspects will include the organizational structure (what, who, how), decision-making processes, hiring policies, supervision and training of staff, volunteerism (supports, expenses), and handling conflicts of interest.

Decide what supports and resources are required

You will need staff time dedicated to resident recruitment, support, training, and skill building. Some financial resources may also be required to train staff in this role. Financial resources should also be dedicated to recognizing the efforts of residents, covering their expenses, and building interpersonal relationships and trust.

Be patient and allow the organization to evolve

The organizational structure that develops early on, during the developmental stage, may not necessarily be the organizational structure that exists later, once programs have been implemented. As mentioned earlier, at the *Better Beginnings* sites, the administrative structures and people's roles and responsibilities changed with each phase and evolved over time.

CHALLENGES

Challenges specific to project management and organization included **implementing value-based project management, developing a workable organizational structure that had a strong community voice, hiring residents as staff, developing decision-making approaches,** and **making the transition to long-term sustainability.**

WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT AND OTHER FUNDERS

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PROJECT SITES AND THE GOVERNMENT

An overview

Government support was foundational to *Better Beginnings, Better Futures*, not only in terms of funding, but also in terms of direction, guidance and constraints.

The programs that stakeholders developed in their communities were funded by three provincial ministries: the Ontario Ministries of Community and Social Services (MCSS), Education and Training, and Health. The government provided support to the project sites through two internal roles within the MCSS: the **Project Design Coordinator** and the

Site Supervisor. The Project Design Coordinator was responsible for ensuring that the project model recommended by *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* was implemented in the field. The Site Supervisor was responsible for working with each of the project sites to implement, administer, and financially monitor the programs. In addition, each project site was assigned a government representative as their contact with the government. A 15-member government committee also met regularly to monitor and support the project.

Proposal development phase (March to June 1990)

The entire proposal development stage lasted less than one year. First, there were four formal government Proposers' Conferences held in four different locations. Interested applicants received a 52-page Request for Proposals (RFP). The RFP included background information, the purpose of the *Better Beginnings* initiative, its goals, the project model, and information on the research that would be involved. Applicants had to submit an initial letter of interest with a broad outline of what they would include in a full proposal in order to receive a $5,000 seed grant. Based on those letters of intent, 50 communities were awarded the seed grants.

The seed grants were used to defray costs of travel, child care, food, surveys and research to enable people in high-risk communities, who were not usually involved in writing proposals, to take part.

Applicants then had three months to complete their proposals. It was a lot of work to put the proposals together, and the sites reported some frustration with the process, as they struggled to include all the required elements to ensure a strong submission. Finally, in a process that took several months, the proposals were reviewed and the sites were selected.

Planning phase (January 1991 to September 1993)

Once sites were selected, a Letter of Agreement was signed between the government committee and the sites. The government had hoped to have all sites up and running within one year of funding, but this process took more than two years. During this period there was considerable contact between the government and the site representatives, including meetings and site visits. It was during this time, as well as during the early part of the demonstration phase, that the government exerted the most influence or control over different aspects of the programs. Once the programs were developed, a formal contract containing the program components and a detailed budget was established with the government, and contact frequency with government representatives diminished.

Demonstration phase
(1993-94 school year through 1996-97 school year)

As mentioned above, during the early part of this phase when programs were being implemented, the government did exert considerable influence on the project and its program components. Tension between government influence and community control was evident in a number of areas, including programs for children outside the mandated age group, the pace of program hiring and development, and program staffing and operations. However, disagreements between sites and government representatives were invariably worked out through a process of negotiation.

In the early years of the demonstration phase the government also organized Round Tables for participants from all sites to share their experiences with project development, and Quality Circles, which were primarily about implementing the research.

Participants in both types of sessions included staff, community residents, and service providers from each of the three project sites.

Near the end of the demonstration phase, the project sites were not sure if funding was going to continue, which caused considerable stress. Because of this concern, there was increased contact between the sites and the funding ministries to ascertain whether they would continue to fund the projects after the demonstration phase ended. A considerable amount of planning, education, advocacy, and organizing occurred to ensure the funding would be continued. Finally, the Premier of Ontario announced that the government would guarantee ongoing funding for the existing *Better Beginnings* project sites.

Sustainability phase (1998 to present)

Once ongoing funding was announced, the projects had to negotiate further with the government as to what their sustainable management structure would look like. At one site, the project became a permanent program of the sponsor or host agency. At another site, the host organization (a school board) had decided late in the demonstration phase that it would no longer be hosting community programs. Eventually the project further developed its partnership with another of its partners, and this organization eventually became the new sponsor agency. At the last site, the project was incorporated and no major change in management structure occurred during the sustainability phase.

As was the case during the demonstration phase, all project sites were responsible for submitting annual reports to the government funders during the sustainability phase.

Government role in development/implementation

Government, through its Project Design Coordinator, Site Supervisor, and government committee, had a profound impact on the kinds of programs that developed in the *Better Beginnings* sites. One of the primary functions of government personnel was to ensure that the programs, as designed and implemented in the communities, stayed true to the original model that had been recommended to and approved by government. At times, however, their actions were seen by some sites as being unnecessarily controlling and intrusive. The tension between government influence and community control was evident at each of the project sites to greater and lesser degrees throughout all phases.

Working with other funders

As previously described, the three project sites received core funding from the provincial ministries to provide high-quality programs to children and families within the 4 to 8 age group. Most of their programming budget was dedicated to these programs. As well, up to 15% of their budget was to be spent on community development in their neighbourhoods. However, often additional funds were necessary to adequately respond to the needs of the community, as identified by its residents. To try to address these needs, stakeholders at each site not only partnered with other service providers in their communities to help provide further programming (see Chapter 4: Engaging Community Partners), but they also pursued funds to supplement government support. Through funding received from other sources, each of the project sites was able to provide additional programs for the community outside of the government-mandated age group.

Work and resources required

In the *Better Beginnings* initiative, government funding provided a critical foundation for the projects. It also provided an infrastructure of resources that sites could use to develop applications for supplementary funding from other sources, in order to provide additional programs to the community. Indeed, without the core funding provided by *Better Beginnings*, the sites probably would not have had the resources necessary to devote to fundraising. Project managers had to devote a lot of time and energy to finding out about foundations or other funding organizations, reading through application requirements, developing and submitting applications, and then communicating and reporting back to funders.

Challenges

Project sites and the government were thrust into a working relationship from the very beginning of the project. Challenges that arose included **limited time to engage residents during program planning and development** (community development was a huge undertaking that took a lot of time and work to achieve — indeed, the government did extend the planning phase by one and a half years to allow the sites more time to meaningfully involve residents in the process); **balancing government/funder requirements and community needs**; **perceived lack of direction and support** (some stakeholders felt the government did not provide enough direction and support during the proposal development stage); **time and resources devoted to accountability**; and **long-term funding.**

Better Beginnings, Better Futures

An effective, affordable community project for promoting positive child development